

LECTURE 1 Q&A

Floris:

Why do humans have such a near unstoppable desire for classifying when classifications are being proven wrong time and time again, and more importantly, have so many harmful side-effects? Who benefits, or then is harmed, by it? Or then, what would be another way of making sense of the world that doesn't involve classifications?

Is "control" the answer in all cases? We want to control nature, and what better way than chopping it into pieces? It would be too threatening otherwise. And we want to control other people, and what better way than showing how they differ from the ideal set by ourselves in our own image? The "other way", I guess, would be holistically and intuitively. For instance, I feel copathy (invented word, means a sense of one-ness) with all (well, most) living beings, and I don't need classifications for it. But then, copathy doesn't build bridges or govern masses, so the ministries that I work for sometimes feel that this is not the best of approaches. ;)

Ali:

Although I have been reading philosophical texts for years, I have always been confused about the term "metaphysics". I have seen some people use this term as a synonym of ontology, but I have also seen some people making a distinction between ontology and metaphysics.

"Metaphysics" as a term went to disrepute with logical empiricism before World War II and came to mean, among analytical philosophers, muddled, obscure, and unhelpful thinking. During the latter part of the twentieth century, it sneaked back. The orthodoxy now seems to be that ontology is a major part of metaphysics, but not all of it. The article here attempts an explanation: http://www.columbia.edu/~av72/papers/PP_2011.pdf Check it out.

Karelia:

If people exist within and in the intersection of multiple subjectivities (according to a pluralist perspective), is the study of social phenomena as shaped and shaping people, necessarily subjective? How can it be argued not to be?

I have given this some thought over the years and I think "yes and no". "Yes" in the sense that of course our investigations will always be conducted by us and

they will therefore contain traces of our thoughts, personality traits, attitudes, etc. “No” in the sense that most good methodologies, both in social science and in the natural sciences, try to mitigate the personal bias – not necessarily the possible group bias (positionalists may celebrate this) – but the individual investigator’s idiosyncrasies. So, I would say, yes it is in a sense subjective, but so are all studies into nature’s wonders. Did that answer your question?

Ronja:

How does one begin to explain/acknowledge abstract concepts such as numbers in mathematics through ontology?

I checked and apparently one doesn’t, at least not now or not necessarily. The nature of numbers, according to this plausible-sounding article – http://www.columbia.edu/~av72/papers/PP_2011.pdf – belongs to metaphysics rather than ontology. Check it out?

Claire:

How can we ensure that our ontological viewpoint is not limiting us in our work (and maybe even in our lives)?

We cannot? I mean, our deepest beliefs concerning what there is (trees and mountains but not gods or angels – or vice versa) are bound to limit and direct the way we think and act and investigate things. The trick, I believe, is to make oneself aware of one’s own presuppositions and postulations, and then try to keep an open mind to other ways of thinking, artificially if need be. Would that work?

Elizaveta:

You explained in detail how questionable is the taxonomy which Luis Borges made on animal division into 14 categories. Apart from commenting on this division (you mentioned several scientists including Foucault), has any other researcher made such a list in a better way from a philosophical point of view? Is Darwinism considered such a taxonomy as well? Why was Borges’s taxonomy regarded and discussed in such progressive time?

Here is somebody thinking about Borges’s taxonomy and its message, and doing one better for humans:

<https://www.thendobetter.com/arts/2019/7/27/messy-borges-celestial-emporium-of-benevolent-knowledge>

Check it out. And yes, Darwinism is the basis of our taxonomies in terms of biological evolution – the picture I had in the middle of the main slide, with the ladder from instincts to humans.

Yian:

In our modern era with advanced knowledge in science and (architectural) engineering, what could be the importance or the necessity of using ontology (philosophy) for studying the topic of protecting national cultural heritage (intangible/tangible)?

Ontology could help us in realising that cultural heritage and other immaterial values can exist at least in subjective and intersubjective ways. They could then be pitched against merely technological and commercial values to protect what is worth protecting. Does that answer your question?

Meng:

Why and how is materialism is linked to reductionism?

Clever – you made me think. Contingently but with some historical inevitability. “Contingently” in that we could also have idealistic reductionism – a creed that all physical phenomena can be reduced to spirit or ideas. This could be based on subjective idealism –

https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Subjective_idealism – or objective (or absolute) idealism –

https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Absolute_Idealism – but has been unfashionable for a century.

Regarding the question 'how do people exist', you have mentioned three forms which are objectively, subjectively, and intersubjectively. Is subjectivity a subordination of intersubjectively?

In a sense, yes. What we are – and think we are just as us – has been formed in interrelations with other people. It is useful to keep these separate, though.

Aleksandra:

I was thinking about phrases on slides 7-8 and the last sentence in particular. What do you mean by "it is possible that it should not be known"? Who is authorized to decide if something should be or should not be known?

It is best that I answer with a personal example. I am an antinatalist and extinctionist by conviction. This means that I would not be the least bit sorry if

humanity ceased to reproduce and then eventually to exist. I discussed this with a colleague in 1998. She held the view that we should concentrate our academic and other efforts to learning how to build a big bomb that would get rid of humanity in one blow. I held the view that, since people are so keen on living, that would go against their autonomy. Besides, I argued, that is exactly the kind of stuff that people should not be studying and telling others about. Some idiot is bound to get hold of the plan and use it to produce great misery. So, does this personal memoir explain what I think? It is about responsibility. You may have thought about something else. If so, share?

Martta:

Could intersubjectivity be used when studying collective sensemaking?

Yes, of course. It is probably the most natural way of investigating the matter. If we took the objectivist approach, we would probably need to think about collective sensemaking in terms of objective (or “absolute”) idealism – https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Absolute_Idealism – which would seem a little strained. Not impossible, but intellectually “challenging” to the contemporary mind. If we took the subjectivist approach, we would probably need to think about collective sensemaking in terms of subjective idealism – https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Subjective_idealism – and here, I think, we would lose the “collective” aspect. So, by elimination, intersubjectivity would seem to rule. Take a look at the linked sources and tell me what you think?

Emilia:

Why is it relevant for researchers in the social sciences to understand ontology?

Who said anything about understanding ontology? This is not a philosophy course in that sense. Participants get, at the most, a general idea of some things related to ontology. The point is to get you to think. As I say in my seven-minute pitch, thinking makes your doctoral work more meaningful. For that end, I could, of course, equally well talk to you about esthetics or science fiction. But since the course is, for historical reasons, called philosophy of science, I stick closer to that.

Elizabeth:

How can we reconcile the way biology constrains the decisions available to us without falling completely into determinism? Is critical realism's synthesis of

metaphysical realism and epistemological relativism the only/best way of really reconciling this? This also makes me think of Mill's quote: "When we say that all human actions take place of necessity, we only mean that they will certainly happen if nothing prevents; when we say that dying of want, to those who can not get food, is a necessity, we mean that it will certainly happen whatever may be done to prevent it" (p.1021). Could we say that biology directs/constrains what is possible but does not (always) determine what is inevitable?

We could say that, and Mill seems to buy into it. It solves the problem on one level. – Jill has fatal cancer. Is it determined that Jill dies of cancer? No, because Jill can jump off a cliff and die before hospitalization. – It does not solve the problem on the deeper level, though. Was there something in Jill's biological constitution that dictated her suicide when threatened by a prolonged hospital death? – Is this distinction understandable?

Is there room in interpretivist ontologies, which seem to be en vogue since positivist ontologies have fallen out of fashion in social science, for those biological determinants? If, continuing with this example, we had earlier set out to conduct a longitudinal study on how hospital environments impact cancer patients' disease trajectories from an interpretivist ontological position and Jill was one of our informants, how could we understand Jill's suicide given the potential biological factors without changing our ontological position?

I suppose that we can admit the realities as revealed by biology, medicine, psychology, and sociology, namely, for instance, that Jill's propensity to commit suicide was elevated by biological (it runs in her family) and social (she had that kind of a background) factors (or determinants). But if we are doing this from the viewpoint of interpretivist methodology or epistemology (the ontology will probably be intersubjectivist), we would eventually be keen on coming up with a meaning-mapping interpretation, which understands the cultural and discursive reasons for Jill's behavior. We could then direct our intervention against bad social practices that underlie these reasons, instead of blaming Jill or her parents or the medical professionals. Or something like that. I'm making this up as I go. How am I doing so far?

Outi:

My research topic is related to risks in long-term capital investments. Hence, I am asking how does ontology relate to constructs which existence is a matter

of opinion? And even if the construct would exist it would be a subjective matter such as a feeling.

At first, I thought that this would be a tricky question for me to answer. But then I realized that intersubjectivity is the key while all the other ways of existence also contribute. The risks of long-term capital investments, and correct me if I'm wrong, are in a sense an objective category. There is a probability to the profit and the hazard that could, in theory, be known, if we knew everything about the market and how actors conceive it. Unfortunately, as per Mill, we don't, so this is a somewhat inexact approach. There are also subjective elements in play, of course, but that is true of all human action. True, we cannot know what the chair of the Norwegian Government Pension Fund Global has been inhaling the morning he (it is a he) decides on divesting on Duke Energy (this is the focal example of my "Business Ethics" course), or how Barach Obama, Donald Trump, or Joe Biden react to this. But, again, we may have some inklings on ideas. Most importantly, and most confusingly, though, we are dealing with intersubjectivity here. What are the interrelations between the actors – consumers, producers, investors, political decision makers – that in the end decide the way the "market reacts" or the chips otherwise fall. So, in terms of ontology, no problems here (you have them all) although epistemologically (how can you know about them) might present challenges. Insofar as getting to the bottom of this, or "learning the truth", you could focus on pragmatism as a theory of truth next time, and see if that idea can help you.

Jiancai:

What is the difference between Ontology and Epistemology? Can you explain the ontology and epistemology in simple way?

You are not the only one interested in this question. Check out the ResearchGate message chain on this:

<https://www.researchgate.net/post/What-is-the-difference-between-Ontology-and-Epistomology>

– As to your second question, no, further than what is said in the chain, I cannot give a simple and exhaustive explanation. As you will see during our second lecture, the two are very much intertwined.

Jukka-Pekka:

What is the value of social sciences if we dismiss positivism as an approach to the study of people and society? In other words, what legitimizes constructivist social sciences?

Better fit with the studied phenomena? Catches dimensions that would remain uncaught by mere positivism? This will be clarified further in the second lecture and in the facilitations on positivism and interpretivism, so stay tuned to the channel.

Mostafa:

You started the presentation with this question: what is there in the world?

I have some more basic questions about the creation of the world which are related to the world's first energy resource. Religious thinkers call it God and utilize logical reasoning for justifying its existence. I want to know how materialists answer these questions:

How has the world been created? What is the agent of the creation of the world? What is the agent of the creation of that agent?! And so on!!!

What is the first energy resource of the world which stimulated the creation of particles? Is it itself particle or not? If yes, what is the agent of its creation? If not, so what is it?

You know as well as I do that the official story that we live by in university life in Finland at least is this: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Big_Bang

It leaves unanswered the question of what was before. But it denies any agency in it.

We live by narratives. The narrative in my home country – perhaps long before my ancestors arrives from Scandinavia or the Baltic countries – was this:

<https://study.com/academy/lesson/finnish-mythology-creation-stories.html>

I was brought up in the tradition that said that is was this:

https://web.mit.edu/jywang/www/cef/Bible/NIV/NIV_Bible/GEN+1.html

Touching the theme, I have released a rock opera that says this:

<https://www.orkidrocks.com/>

But all these leave your question of the original agency unanswered. This is why we, as curious human being, want to create more understandable

answers. They may be wrong. But if we live by them, studies in social sciences should take them seriously.

Did I answer your question(s)?

Toan Tran:

A question about determinism and free will. If we reject the idea of determinism, then we in fact reject, social sciences' ability to predict behaviors. But then what about free will? As you said, without free will, people would not be able to bend the course of history. But it appears to me such a will are also often influenced by some form of internal or environmental pressure. Does it mean free will is just an illusion of brain?

You are touching an interesting question here. – If we believe in materialist determinism, free will is an illusion of the brain. Everything that we register as our “own choices” is a brain event’s interpretation in our mind. And history proceeds as it proceeds, without our intervention. – If we abandon materialist determinism, we have two possibilities. – We can go for idealist determinism. https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Absolute_Idealism If we do, then everything that we register as our “own choices” is in fact dictated by the objective movement of the Spirit, whatever that means. And history proceeds as it proceeds, without our intervention. – Or we can go for indeterminism. But if events are not determined, then they are random. So, everything that we register as our “own choices” is a random event in a world that we cannot control. And history proceeds as it proceeds, without our intervention. – As you can see, then, we cannot win in this philosophical game. I suggest that we stop playing it and forget about it. Life is too short.

Sahar:

You wrote "Even if something could be known about the things that you are studying, it is possible that it should not be known." – So, shouldn't we stop the journey at this point?!

Can you be a little bit more specific? The sentence means that there are things – how to kill everyone on Earth in one blast, for instance – that are probably best left unknown. I doubt that any of the course participants is planning anything on that scale. So, which journey do you think should be stopped?

Zhiqiang

*Can we exist all by ourselves, and can we live without connection with others?
Are we just a component of society?*

Robinson Crusoe experimented on this, but he had lived with other people for decades before his isolation and had humanmade tools with him. So, I guess the answer is, mainly, yes, we are components of communities and societies. Then, again, communities and societies consist of individuals and their interactions.

Marjukka:

Still, I am wondering, why is it that our original thinking (originated by these great minds in the past) have ignored the social interaction and humanity in science? Why humane perspective does not fit into scientific considerations? Why human elements or subjectivity are doomed to be inaccurate, unreliable, non-meaningful?

It was not always so. Ancient and Medieval philosophers, as well as the moral and political philosophers of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, counted subjectivity and intersubjectivity among their primary concerns. It is only with the rise of technology, capitalism, and positivism in the philosophy of science that scholars started worrying about the “inexactness” of the emerging social sciences. And even then, as we saw in Mill, they tried to defend knowledge about the human mind and interaction as “exact enough”. The real culprit, however, is the dominance of ontology, epistemology, and philosophy of science (i.e. “theoretical philosophy”) over sensitive and sensible moral and political philosophy (i.e. “practical philosophy”). But that is another story, and as a representative of the latter field, I am biased.